

ORSETT BRIEFING PAPERS FOR PSYCHOLOGISTS

NO.13 - KEY HISTORICAL THINKERS: Hobbes, Rousseau, and Locke

THOMAS HOBBS (1588-1679)

Thomas Hobbes can be said to have applied the "scientific method" (as known at the time) to the production of knowledge. This included observation, deductive thought, "thought experiments" (hypothetical imaginings), and speculation.

In "The Leviathan" (published 1652), Hobbes explored the relationship between human nature and the state.

Human beings have two kinds of "motions":

- "vital motions" - involving bodily processes;
- "voluntary motions" - speech, intelligence, and voluntary bodily movements.

These motions are the basis of actions, and, in turn, the basis of "endeavours": "Human motions thus produce endeavours or appetites and desires for food, drink, and a variety of other basic physical necessities"¹. Also individuals avoid certain things called "aversions".

Appetites and aversions are focused on "Good", and the ability to secure "Good" is power: "The Power of Man, (to take it universally) is his present means to obtain some future apparent Good"².

Power can be divided into "Originall" ("Faculties of the Body, or Mind"), and "Instrumentall" (power acquired through the application of originall power). Power once secured begets more power, though.

Hobbes believed that "Nature hath made men so equal". But "from this equality of ability, ariseth equality of hope in the attaining of our ends. And therefore, if any two men desire the same thing, which nevertheless they cannot both enjoy they become

¹ Knuttila, M & Kubik, W (2000) State Theories (3rd ed) London: Zed Books; p20.

² Hobbes, T (1968) The Leviathan Harmondsworth: Penguin; p150.

enemies..."³.

Generally, human existence is a "warre of every man against every man", and this limits the opportunity for human development. Hobbes's solution was a social contract where individuals give up their "rights" to the sovereign ("Leviathan"; monarch or assembly) who, though absolute authority, brings order to disorder: "There must be some coercive power to compel men equally to the performance of their covenants, by the terror of some punishment, greater than the benefit they expect by the breach of their covenant"⁴.

The existence of this absolute authority, only responsible to God, is preferable to "civil war", and a precondition for civilised society: "The state is thus at the core of human existence. It is the constitution, the basis of all social structures"⁵.

Hobbes presented a pessimistic view of human nature, as captured in the famous quote from "The Leviathan": "life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short". Yet humans are rational and self-preserving enough to form a social contract with the sovereign.

Hobbes's ideas make sense as a product of his time. There was much disorder in the 17th century, and a strong state/sovereign reduced this allowing for industrial and commercial progress. Hobbes was primarily a Royalist during the English Civil War era, and he even tutored the son of Charles I. Some of his writings were supporting the actual king, while others were hypothetical about the absolute ruler.

JEAN JACQUES ROUSSEAU (1712-1778)

Rousseau was a Geneva-born, 18th century philosopher who observed that "man is naturally peaceful and shy", and it is "society" that produces conflict: "He only becomes soldier after having been citizen. It is not in natural man that one finds the great propensities for war"⁶. The idea is best summarised in the oft-quoted: "noble savage", and the first sentence of "The Social Contract" (written in 1762): "Man is born free but everywhere is in chains".

Individuals are fine by themselves, but coming

³ Hobbes, T (1962) The Leviathan New York: Macmillan/Collier Books.

⁴ Hobbes, T (1974) The Leviathan New York: Collier Macmillan; p113.

⁵ op cit Knuttila & Kubik p23.

⁶ Rousseau, J.J (1999) The state and war: Confederation as means to peace in Europe. In Viotti & Kauppi op cit p114.

together is the problem, it seems. Rousseau ⁷ used the allegory of the stag hunt to represent individual interests against co-operation. Five individuals have the choice to co-operate in hunting a stag that would feed them all, or leave the group and capture a hare just to feed themselves. If an individual agrees to co-operate, then they depend on all the others to also co-operate.

The need for co-operation also produces the possibility of conflict:

The hunger of each will be satisfied by the fifth part of a stag, so they "agree" to co-operate in a project to trap one. But also the hunger of any one of them will be satisfied by a hare, so, as a hare comes within reach, one of them will grab it. The defector obtains the means of satisfying his hunger but in doing so permits the stag to escape. His immediate interest prevails over consideration for his fellows ⁸.

Individuals co-operate when there is a "community of interests", and this is best achieved when "some coercive power must be provided to co-ordinate the actions and consistency which they could never acquire of themselves" ⁹.

In the "state of nature", individuals will always go for the hare, so their co-operation has to be enforced by authority.

Because "society" is the cause of problems, socially created inequalities are much greater than biologically based inequalities ("difference of age, health, bodily strength, and the qualities of the mind or the soul" ¹⁰).

JOHN LOCKE (1632-1704)

Locke is seen as one of the philosophers behind empiricism, and thus scientific observation. Science must be based on "phenomenalist nominalism": "only statements about phenomena which can be directly experienced can count as knowledge" ¹¹.

For empiricists, knowledge is thus gained through experience rather than being innate.

⁷ Rousseau, J.J (1950) The Social Contract and Discourse New York: E.P. Dutton & Co.

⁸ Waltz, K.N (1999) Explaining war. In Viotti & Kauppi op cit p135.

⁹ Rousseau, J.J (1917) A Lasting Peace Through the Federation of Europe and the State of War London: Constable & Co p49.

¹⁰ Rousseau quoted in Haralambos, M & Holborn, M (1995) Sociology: Themes and Perspectives (4th ed) London: Collins p23.

¹¹ Smith, S (1999) Positivism and beyond. In Viotti & Kauppi op cit p43.

In 1694, John Locke produced a second edition of "An Essay Concerning Human Understanding" ¹². In an added chapter in this edition, he made the distinction between the self (secular idea) and the soul (religious idea). In a time of change from agricultural to industrial society in England, this idea of personal identity or self struck a chord, particularly the concept of self-consciousness:

Locke's proclamation that the self resided in self-consciousness (as opposed to unself conscious being and action) suggested a division of self into the monitoring self and the monitored self, observer and observed. The observer need not be oneself; rather the idea grew of a self observed by others, from whom one's self-evaluation derived ¹³.

This idea of the self was a development upon Locke's general concept of consciousness ("the perception of what passes in a Man's own mind" ¹⁴). Consciousness is the existence of representations of external objects in the mind. Language is the means of communicating these representations. Locke made the distinction with a parrot making sounds: "Before a man makes any Proposition, he is supposed to understand the terms he uses in it, or else he talks like a Parrot, only making a noise by imitation.." ¹⁵.

In the "Second Treatise on Government" (published in 1689), John Locke argued that in the "state of nature", humans enjoyed like: "The state of nature has a law of nature to govern it, which obliges everyone; and reason, which is that law teaches all mankind who will but consult it that, being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty or possessions" ¹⁶.

While "human activity in the state of nature private property" ¹⁷. The existence of private property can produce conflict. To reduce this possibility, individuals give up their rights to a "common superior power", "community", or "legislative power". But this power must not be absolute, and be concerned with the public good: "The end of government is the good of mankind" ¹⁸. In other words, laws must restrict the power over ordinary

¹² 1st edition 1689.

¹³ Hollway, W (2007) Self. In Hollway, W; Lucey, H & Phoenix, A (eds) Social Psychology Matters Maidenhead: Open University Press p123.

¹⁴ Locke, J (1975) An Essay Concerning Human Understanding Oxford: Oxford University Press p115.

¹⁵ *ibid* p614.

¹⁶ Locke, J (1952) The Second Treatise on Government Indianapolis: Bobbs Merrill p5.

¹⁷ *op cit* Knuttila & Kubik p24.

¹⁸ *op cit* Locke (1952) p128.

individuals.

It is important to note that Locke was not advocating full democracy, though his ideas have been used as the basis of modern liberal democracy. For Locke, the "community" was seen in terms of property, and "it is safe to assume that the 'people' are defined as property holders" ¹⁹.

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¹⁹ op cit Knuttila & Kubik p26.

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